

"MOTHS OR MIRACLES"

INTRODUCTION

I can remember how as a boy on Sunday nights I would stretch out on the living room floor in front of the radio and listen to the Jack Benny program. Remember it? Remember how Jack Benny played the role of the penny pincher and America laughed at his stubborn stinginess and for a while forgot its depression blues and a shortly thereafter its wartime sacrifices. He was so miserly he wouldn't part with his money even long enough to put it into the bank. He kept it in a vault in his home. I recall one Sunday night episode when a thief broke into his home, pointed a gun at him and demanded, "Your money or your life". And after a long pause, one so long you thought the radio had blown a tube, Mr. Benny replied, "I'm thinking, I'm thinking". Now, as we - the members and friends of this church - in the week ahead ponder our pledge to the 1967 Operating Budget of this church, the situation isn't quite like that. The Stewardship and Finance Commission has ruled out the use of guns and other pressure techniques. The choice we have can be phrased somewhat differently, though it requires, I feel, the same, long, hard thinking.

DEVELOPMENT

I would put it to you this way: our choice is moths or miracles. And it's laid out there in those familiar words of Jesus that were read to you earlier in the service by Mr. Witmer:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.....But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you".

At issue, you see, is not the treasure itself. That's neutral. The question is how we use it - what we seek with it - where we invest it. Mis-use means moth-eaten, and this truth is manifest. Plow up the grassy plains and the soil blows away. Waste natural resources - water, minerals, forests - and begin to be in want. Contaminate the very air we breathe - and health suffers. Exploit human resources and end up with dangerous divisions in society. Store up for air-tight security and suffocate in boredom. How we use our treasures, and for what, does come back to haunt us or bless us. Sooner or later the accounting is made.

THE CHOICE: MOTHS OR MIRACLES

I put it to you this way: the choice is moths or miracles, and we can't run away from it. Jesus said a great deal about material matters. Seeking God's kingdom has to do much with earthly issues, if we're truly in earnest. "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; a stranger and you welcomed me...naked and you clothed me...sick and you visited me...in prison and you came...as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" Kingdom seeking as much to do with money spending - where - why - how - we invest our treasure.

So we come quickly to the heart of it. Why, you ask, should one invest in the Church? For one thing, there's the practical reason. One Fall, several years ago, the slogan for the United Fund Drive was "If you won't - who will?" This is one reason to invest in the church. There's no one else to ask - no foundations, no government grants given to churches, no alumni associations to approach. And, let it be clear, to my knowledge there are no millionaires in our midst either - no one more able than anyone else to give. Only the members and friends of this church can be approached. The issue isn't ability - but willingness. "If you won't - who will?"

But it cuts deeper than this. Christians have always tried to glorify God through

the highest and the best of their culture - whether it was art or music or architecture. One of the great achievements of our society is our economic system - the fantastic production and distribution of material abundance. The implications of it are exciting, for no longer is the Christian ethic an abstract, unattainable ideal. It is a concrete possibility. Now, as never before, we can feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, clothe the naked. That is, we can glorify God with our highest - if we will. Of course, giving to the church is not the only way for such glorification of God to be made. But, for us, it has a place of priority because the church is the sole institution on earth concerned with the ultimate "why" of our community life as well as the practical "how" and "what". We are to feed, clothe, house, and heal people - that's the "what"; and by all possible public and private agencies and avenues - that's the "how". And here's the "why" - because all men are brothers and not just by some fragile human consent and consensus, but by binding divine decrees. Let that "why" wither and the meaning and the momentum of all charity, all humanitarian work will die and it will be every man for himself, and meals for the moths.

COMMUNITY OF COMPASSION

So, to invest in the Church is to invest in miracles. That is what the Church seeks, what it hopes for and works toward. It is miracles in people and miracles for people - this is what the church tries to bring about, and we have seen such miracles occur because the church is a community of compassion.

Some scenes in literature are etched on my heart and I would etch them on yours. One of them is from the novel, "Another Country" when confused, scared, broken and bitter Rufus commits suicide and a long time after, his friend Vivaldo, tells someone about the last night he and Rufus were together:

"We had a fight...." said Vivaldo, "and at the very end....after he'd cried, and after he'd told me so many terrible things....I looked at him, he was looking at me.....and I had the weirdest feeling that he wanted me to take him in my arms....I cared for him. I didn't want him to die. But when he was dead...I wondered what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been.....afraid. But, oh, Lord when he died, I thought that maybe I could have saved him if I'd just reached out....and held him. Do you know what I mean?"

I think we know what he means. We know because the Church tries to take people in its arms and hold and comfort and save them - from ignorance and aimlessness and bitterness, from loneliness and ugliness and fear and boredom and self-destruction - hold them and help them so no one will die from being ignored or rejected or forgotten. It's just that embracing, that gathering and holding, that our budget has to do with. This is what all of our manifest ministries are about, and our hidden ministries, too. For every visible ministry performed in and by the church, there are countless invisible ones, too.

Much of our work is not seen except by those whose wounds are touched and whose lives are supported a little by it. But it yet may be the most significant thing of anything that we do - those quiet, secret ministries - hour after hour, week after week, year after year - the counselling, the calling, the comforting, the listening, the reconciling, - the holding in our arms, in your behalf, the broken hearts, the broken lives, the broken dreams, the broken marriages and trying to put them together again, trying to work a miracle here and there.

Please do not misunderstand. What I'm saying is not to claim credit - none is due - but to proclaim the compassion and the concern that is the mark of the church and that your giving enables. The ministry of compassion requires a certain amount of competence and wherever any professional minister of this church goes, you are there with him through what you give to the church. The miracles that occur because of your concern, for the most part, are hidden from view. But be sure there are some. And be sure, too, that the need for more is great beyond telling. Broken and bitter people, discouraged and desperate souls, are looking to us in increasing number. Vivaldo's words often haunt me in the silence of the night, after all the sobs and screams and angry words of the day:

"But when he was dead - I wondered what would have happened if I could have taken him in my arms....if I hadn't been - afraid... maybe I could have saved him....if I had just reached out".

Our pledging is an investment in compassion. It is a matter of not being afraid but reaching out, taking in our arms all the lost and the least, the frightened and the hurt and holding them. Not to give, to be afraid to reach out, way out, is always to wonder what would have happened, who might have helped, what miracle might have been wrought, if we had.

THE CHURCH CELEBRATES

But to invest in the church is to invest in miracles not only because the church cares, but also because the church celebrates.

One Sunday night last winter I remember watching Candid Camera on television. This TV program, as you know, is the one where the television camera is hidden and takes pictures of unwitting people in unlikely situations. This program had to do with a lunchroom scene - ordinary in every way except an extraordinary rose had been placed in a vase on one table. When anyone sat down with a cup of coffee or a coke or whatever, the rose would rear up out of its vase, bend over and start inhaling the person's drink. Without exception, the person would look around to make sure no one else had seen and then move to another table. Somehow, in this matter of fact world, they had come to the conclusion that wild and wonderful things like that just don't happen. So there were no smiles, no laughter, no clapping of hands or shouts of joy. "How sad" the reviewer observed.

Yes, how sad; how sad in a way. Well....the church is the community that sees and celebrates the wonderful. And it tries to make sure that everyone else sees too, and joins in the celebration of the incredible truth that flowers do bow their beautiful heads and drink; that trees grow and winds blow and the sun shines; that babies are born and lovers whisper and singers sing and the wise teach; that roads do go someplace and pictures are painted and anthems written and poems penned and marriages deepened; that lessons are learned and diseases healed and sorrows shared and hopes reborn, and justive and peace sought and battles won and faith kept.

So laughter fills our halls and songs climb our walls and affirmations sound forth through those doors like trumpet calls because in the midst of all the tears and tribulations, fury and frustrations, that have rubbed the world raw, we insist that the light has not gone out. For we believe that God's mercy outruns our sin; His power overrules our impotence; His purposes undergird our uncertainties, and when men hear and respond hearts are brave again and arms are strong and miracles do happen. We can't prove it; but we bet on it. We bet our lives that truth beats lies; that beauty wins over ugliness; that goodness defeats evil; that love conquers hate.

This is what our worship adds up to. This is what we celebrate when we come together. All the long hours of planning and preparation and perspiration that burst out and run over in song and in word each Sunday morning (in worship and in fellowship),

and if you only knew how many long hours go into this one short hour, and the problems that we face getting to this point. This and everything else we do in and outside of the church adds up to one mighty celebration, one radical and to some ridiculous proclamation to the world of our irrepressible confidence in Almighty God. Look, this rose is drinking my coffee; this child is holding my hand; this woman is loving me; this one I've hurt is forgiving me; that Man died and was raised for me; God rules - wonderful! That celebration is what the budget and our pledge is about. Dare we really glance around to make sure no one sees or hears and then move to another place as though it hadn't happened. Dare we let the world down like that? *

THE BUILDING

But our budget has ^{ALSO} almost much to do with things that on the face of it don't have much to do with those miracles....things like heat, and light, and insurance and building repairs and keeping the building clean and the elevator running and the organ working, ~~and the building clean~~. So we need to be reminded that compassion and celebration must be incarnate. Embracing requires arms; proclaiming a voice. If the church is a mission of compassion and celebration, then the building is the place where it happens and the heat, the light, the insurance and all the rest are part of the arms, the hands, the feet, the voice without which the mission falters and the miracles fade. Let us no more apologize for our buildings. They are the space, the place where the church happens. And let us give so as not to ever need to apologize either for what or what does not happen here.

CLOSING

Horace Mann was pleading for money once. He was asking the legislature of Massachusetts for funds for a certain school. One of the legislators asked him if the amount he was seeking wasn't an awfully lot for a school. Mann agreed that it was but that the school was worth all the money in the treasury of Massachusetts if it saved only one boy. The lawmaker said, "That's a rather extreme statement, isn't it". Mann answered, "Not if it were my boy".

Your church this coming year needs pledges totalling over \$35,000. This is \$4,000 more than we had pledged for the present yearly operating budget. We minister here to a procession of people. Many of our members and faithful givers have moved away. We need many new friends to help us if we are to continue with our mission and ministry of compassion and celebration. You may feel that we're asking for a lot, but it will be worth it if we embrace and save only one person. For every person we touch and hold and help is our boy - our brother - God's son. The choice is moths or miracles. And when we consider this coming week what we will give to the church for the year ahead, we shall be helping to decide which it will be: moths or miracles.

LET US PRAY:

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal; But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Our prayer is a silent searching of our own hearts and minds and consciences. Help us, O God, now to lay these things to heart....we ask this in the spirit of Jesus - our Lord, our Judge and our Friend.

* For what the church has been given to give to the world is what the world needs more than any other thing." Shoemaker.